



2006 Census: Informing a nation

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ABOUT THE ARTICLES

Australia's next Census will be held on 8 August 2006. The Census has been a significant part of Australian history. The articles below, based on the Census chapter of the recently published book, 'Informing a Nation, The Evolution of the Australian Bureau of Statistics', focus on the early days of that shared history.

To give the Census articles context, there is also an article about the writing of 'Informing a Nation'.

The articles can be freely downloaded and reproduced.

INFORMING A NATION

Sometimes the ending of a life can be a spur for others to take action. The mid to late 1990s saw the passing of three former Commonwealth Statisticians - Roland Wilson (1996), Jack O'Neill (1998) and Keith Archer (1999). Their deaths gave momentum to a project which had been slowly developing - the writing of a history of the Australian Bureau of Statistics.

A group of ABS officers, some close to retirement, had floated the idea of a history in the mid-90s. Then one officer, Dale Chatwin, did some preliminary research and arranged for over thirty interviews to be conducted with ex-ABS staff.

The deaths of the leading statisticians helped to convince others that a history should be written, not only as a record of achievements, but while there was still time to draw on the corporate memory of veteran ex-officers of the bureau.

In 2002 the official decision was made to write the history. It was also decided that the job would be done internally and expressions of interest were called for from within the bureau.

While a short history had been commissioned externally in the early 1980s - and published in the 1988 yearbook - a significant proportion of the finished material dealt with the period before 1901.

This time the history would concentrate on the ABS and its direct predecessor, the Commonwealth Bureau of Census and Statistics.

Two ABS officers with history degrees, Beth Wright and Joanne Caddy, were selected to write the history. Together they shared the research and writing. Work began on the project in August 2002.

Wright said that the project was "fabulous to do ... an opportunity to use my history degree". She said her degree in social history complimented Joanne Caddy's degree in economic history.

Wright and Caddy worked for three years on the project and the final result, entitled *Informing a Nation, The Evolution of the Australian Bureau of Statistics*, is impressive and very readable. The book is attractively presented, with design by another ABS officer - Petrina Carden.

It was launched on October 31, 2005, the centenary year of the bureau, known before 1975 as the Commonwealth Bureau of Census and Statistics.

The print run is 5,000. Every staff member of the ABS - over 3,900 people - will be presented with a copy, as well as ex-staff who worked for 30 years or more. The book will also be issued through the Library Extension Program which makes ABS products available to libraries around Australia, including university libraries. CD-roms of the book will be produced for the LEP, but the libraries will also be offered a hard copy.

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GETTING STARTED

The first national Census undertaken by the Commonwealth Bureau of Census and Statistics was taken in Australia at midnight between the 2nd and 3rd of April 1911, as recorded in *Informing a Nation*. This was in line with the Census in the United Kingdom and other parts of the British Empire.

Although participation in the Census was compulsory as it still is today, from the very beginning the Census authorities tried to get the community to be happy to be involved.

About 7,300 collectors and counters worked on the first Census. Collectors mainly travelled on foot, but some used horses or bicycles.

Flooding and bogs stranded some collectors in Queensland and a drought in Western Australia meant some could not find feed for their horses. Police also did some of the collection in remote areas in some states. In all states police provided details of tramps and campers.

Notices were placed in many newspapers to inform the population of the upcoming Census. Notices were also placed in Chinese newspapers and in the cities translators were employed.

To assist families in which the adults could not read and write, the state education departments gave lessons to older school children on how to fill out Census forms. Booklets were sent to teachers explaining the details of the Census.

The first Census was tabulated in Melbourne almost entirely by hand.

Details collected included name, sex, date of birth, marital status, marriage date, number of children, relationship to head of household,

blindness and deaf-mutism, birthplace, nationality and race, length of residence, religion, education, occupation and type of building.

A common error was that members of a household who had been dead for some time were often recorded on the household form, because they had been household members.

The Census also tried to record university qualifications but the data quality was very poor and was not released. The Statistician's Report, issued in 1917, noted that known holders of degrees had failed to give the desired information, apparently because they had not read the instructions carefully.

On the other hand, "there were many cases in which existing and non-existent degrees of existing and non-existent Universities were recorded as possessed by persons whose acquaintance with a University must have been a negligible quantity."

It was not until 1966 before another attempt was made to obtain any educational attainment information from the Census.

For the second Census in April 1921, electoral staff in all states were employed to collect and distribute the Census forms as they were considered to have the best knowledge of specific collection areas.

Despite droughts, floods, cyclones and strikes, the Census was completed on time. The 1921 Census was tabulated using automatic machines for the first time.

One of the significant findings of the 1921 Census was the low rate of males to females in the 20-30 year age group, showing the impact of World War I on the population.

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DISCOVERING THE RUBELLA LINK

These days it is well known that if a pregnant woman is infected with rubella, or German measles, it can cause abnormalities in the unborn child.

But, as Beth Wright relates in *Informing a Nation*, it took an Australian doctor's hunch and a careful analysis of Australian Census figures to firmly establish the link.

In the 1911 Census deaf-mutism was found to be very high among 10-14

year-olds. This was highlighted in the Statistician's report for the Census, but could not be adequately explained.

In the 1921 Census the same pattern existed among 20-24 year-olds, proving that the 1911 result was not a statistical anomaly. This time the Statistician's report suggested a medical reason for the figures and stated, " ... it is a reasonable assumption therefore that the abnormal number of deaf-mutes ... was the result of the extensive epidemic of infectious diseases which occurred soon after many in those age groups were born."

Several diseases were specifically named as possible candidates, but not rubella.

The Statistician's report for the Census of 1933, the last in which figures for deaf-mutism were collected, repeated these conclusions.

During World War II Australian ophthalmologist Sir Norman McAllister Gregg discovered that a significant number of congenital cataract cases occurred in children of around the same age. He overheard two mothers talking in his surgery about how they both had rubella during their pregnancies and began to investigate a possible link.

Prompted by his work Australian statistician Oliver Lancaster revisited the Census figures of 1911, 1921 and 1933.

As stated in *Informing a Nation*, "Lancaster found that there was a peak in the level of deaf-mutism in the age cohort born in 1898 and 1899 and that this matched with a known outbreak of rubella in those years.

"This was the first time in the world that the link between rubella and congenital problems with unborn children was firmly established."

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CENSUS CAMARADERIE IN THE DEPRESSION

One of the gems author Beth Wright unearthed for *Informing a Nation* was a lively record of some of the men who worked on the 1933 Census, the first one coordinated from Canberra.

In 1932, Walter Williamson, a thirty-two year old draftsman from Sydney, came to Canberra to help draw up some of the 11,000 maps needed for collectors. He and his family lived in a small government house at the foot of Mount Ainslie.

It was at the height of the Great Depression and he was one of about 60 men who worked on the maps in the Census Office in Civic.

In spite of the grim economic circumstances and the fact that the job would be short-lived, Wright notes that a strong camaraderie seems to have developed among the men. After the job was completed in May 1933 Williamson used a spare collector's book to record the details of his workmates.

He also copied into the book limericks about most of the men. There were also larger poems and illustrations added by others.

"[The collector's book] was just really nice to find, quite unexpected," Beth Wright said. "It says more about the Depression than it does about the Census ... it is quite an interesting book. You get a real sense of how small Canberra was at the time."

The comments in Williamson's collector's book make it clear that the men were very glad for the work, at a time when up to a third of the national workforce was unemployed.

Wright records of the men: "From the poems we learn that not all were draftsmen. Some were employed to check the plans, paste the diagrams into the covers of the collectors' record books and even to stamp the front of the book with the details of the collectors' districts."

Williamson also drew a sketch of the Census office and the block on which it stood. Some roads were not yet built, so he added in two additional roads beside the office, naming them after his young daughters Noreen and Beverley. Today, one of those daughters happens to be the mother of a current ABS employee.

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GOING BUSH FOR THE CENSUS

Census Collectors face all sorts of difficulties, but the experiences of a Collector working in a remote area on the 1954 Census reads like something out of Dad and Dave.

The Collector in question, F. McTighe, was a police officer from Harts Range Police Station in the Northern Territory. In a letter to the Northern Territory Chief Statistician, reprinted in *Informing a Nation*, he described his experiences.

His vehicle frequently had problems. The generator "burst out", he

borrowed another, he had to fix his brakes, later the "water pump bearing completely gave out", the pulley on the generator collapsed, the engine boiled, but still he managed to borrow and improvise parts and keep his vehicle going. His trials included fixing the water pump gasket in the dark.

As he pressed on, the car had "continuous blow-outs". He borrowed another pump, borrowed patches, he bogged the car in sandy creek beds twice.

He went from "daylight to almost midnight as a rule, taking the Census and [car] registrations."

People gave him "vague directions" of the roads. As there was no road to one of his locations he had to branch into Queensland and - coming back into the territory - came across a lone woman at Lake Nash.

Asked where the Argadargada road was "she pointed west ... but she didn't know where it went for sure, or if there was water en route, nor whether it was 120 miles or 226 miles" to the nearest station. It turned out the next station was right on the road only 23 miles away.

He visited mica mines, outback stations, climbed a mountain to reach more miners. He had to "pull several miners out of bed, sat on the side of beds of others and helped them fill in the form."

He arrived in Alice Springs on 12 July with his Census work completed and was asked: "where have you been?"

Summing up his experiences with people during his Census taking he wrote: "Most require at least 30 minutes explanation as to why the Census should be carried out. They gasp at the size of the form, and make numerous comments as to whether they have to include the number of teeth they have, criticise the way the form has been drawn up. Can't understand why nationality and race are both required, because if they are British, they are not Chinamen.

"They all have a joyful time getting each other's ages, Mother usually won't tell until she has made a cup of tea, or had a girlish giggle. As to who is the head of the house, Father accuses Mother of being same, and Mother accuses vice versa.

"If their name, placed in the column, is Shirley, they are naturally female and the form has been drawn up stupidly when they have to place [sex] in a separate column. Some claim they are the Australian race, not the European, they are living in Australia. Hold the pen over the paper, tell funny stories, or go into long reasons why Billy is not a cousin, but a cousin in law or something.

"... the people all mean well and try to assist in anything but hurrying.
That was my main trouble."

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